

BIOGRAPHY

FRANCIS ALISON, Jr.
A Surgeon of the Revolution

BY
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FRANCIS ALISON, JR.—A SURGEON OF THE REVOLUTION

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While the chief medical officers of the American Revolution have, for the main part, received a fair share of notice in the medical annals of this country, it is amazing how the rank and file of the medical patriots in the War of Independence have been shamefully neglected. When, in looking over the Continental Hospital Returns of Francis Alison, Jr., I sought for a biography of this faithful servitor of the sick and wounded, I searched in vain. Only here and there could be found a few fragmentary references. These should be worthy of a round-up in this place.

Francis Alison, Jr. was born on March 28, 1751, at New-London Cross-Roads in Chester County, Pennsylvania. His father, the Rev. Francis Alison, shortly afterwards removed with his family to Philadelphia and acquired considerable fame as teacher in the University of Pennsylvania, of which institution he was the first vice-provost.

From this "Academy," as it was then generally designated, Francis, Jr., on June 5, 1770, received the degree of A. B. (Fig. 1). He had attended Dr. Adam Kuhn's lectures on *Materia Medica*

Omibus d. quos presentes Literæ pervenerint.
Salutem.

Novi Professores Vice Professores Collegii ac Academiæ Philadelphienensis
testamur. **WILLIAM HARRISON**... propterea, ac ingenuum Mathematicum, Romanicum, Litteris, Philosophia et Eloquia
quod nos feliciter inauguravit, et postquam, Curriculi sui spatii peracta, in Aula nostra, coram Curatoribus multisque aliis Civibus digni-
simis ad Examen vocatus, se idem habuisse studio satis vocatum ab ipso comprobasset, ac Curatorum Mandato in Publicis
Comitiis quibus **Die Vnu.** Anno 1770 celebratis **Aggrecamentis** Gradum ipse consecutum.
In cujus rei Testimonium, hi Curatores majori Collegii ac Academiæ sigillo muniti Die Annique predictæ singu-
lorum Nomina subscripserunt.

Guili. Smith S.T.D. Ceterique Academia Præfatus.

Guilielmus Harrison M.A. &c. Pra. Alon. S.T.D. Cui Vice-Præfatus & Acad. Rector. **WILLIAM HARRISON** M.A. &c. Pra. Phil.
Wm. Harrison M.A. &c. Pra. Alon. S.T.D. Cui Vice-Præfatus & Acad. Rector. **WILLIAM HARRISON** M.A. &c. Pra. Phil.
Wm. Harrison M.A. &c. Pra. Alon. S.T.D. Cui Vice-Præfatus & Acad. Rector. **WILLIAM HARRISON** M.A. &c. Pra. Phil.

Fig. 1.

Alison's Bachelor's Degree.

Courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.

during 1769¹ and from the signatures appended to his diploma, it seems evident that Shippen, Rush and Morgan were also his teachers. Adam Kuhn had been appointed Professor of *Materia Medica* and Botany in 1768 and gave a course in Botany during 1768 and 1769, but seems to have dropped it in subsequent years. Francis Alison, Jr., continued in the study of botany as a science, along with his medical work, and from the many notes left among his papers relative to plants, their classification, etc., a subject at that time holding a peculiar fascination for the inhabitants of Chester County, it was presumed that he intended, at some period to publish a work in that field. He was also well versed in mineralogy, but the specimens which he left at the time of his death were not accompanied with any memoranda to distinguish their character or location.²

He continued his medical studies under the preceptorship of Dr. Samuel Duffield and, having paid the usual student's fee of five pounds to be applied to building the medical library, was admitted to the privilege of attending and observing the practice of the physicians and surgeons at the Pennsylvania Hospital. (Fig. 2.) He then continued his studies at the College and in 1773 the A. M. degree was conferred upon him. With these degrees he seems to have been content, for it appears he never received the M. D. degree at the University of Pennsylvania. The degree of Bachelor of Medicine was first conferred in 1768, the first medical honors thus given in America, but apparently it was not until the year 1790 that the Doctorate in Medicine was conferred upon graduates by the University of Pennsylvania, for in the July issue of the *American Museum* that year, Dr. William Shippen, in a "Short address, shewing the advantages of conferring the degree of doctor of medicine in the first instance, and pointing out a proper plan of a medical education," which was delivered at the commencement of the College of Philadelphia, stated, in part:

Since our last commencement in this place a change in the form of conferring degrees, has been adopted by the learned and benevolent fathers of this seminary, which I propose to explain and justify.

¹ Pepper, William, Dean, Medical School University of Pennsylvania, Personal communication.

² Hazard, Samuel, *Register of Pennsylvania*, 1828, Vol. 1, p. 303.

Francis Alison D^r Student in Physic & Surgery under Doctor
 Samuel Duffield of the City of Philadelphia having paid to the Steward
 of the Pennsylvania Hospital the Sum of Five pounds Currency to be able
 at any time purchasing a Medical Library pursuant to the Laws of the S^t Hospital
 is admitted to the Privilege of attending & observing the Practice of the Physicians &
 Surgeons that he conforming to good order the Rules to be observed
 by such Students. In Witness whereof the Managers in attendance
 have hereunto set their Hands & Sealed the 24th of 1st Mo^r 1770
 Attest. I do Affirm. Jⁿ 1st Mo^r 1770 Sam^l D^r D^r
 Jⁿ 1st D^r

Fig. 2.

Until now, the highest medical honours have never been conferred upon students in the first instance. Whatever might have been their genius—whatever their industry—and however qualified by these, and the knowledge which had been the consequence of them, for the attainment of every reward in our power to give, they were obliged to stop at the bachelor's degree, being all the honour we could bestow, and to practice three years, with reputation in that subordinate capacity, before they could be raised to a higher one.

When the Revolutionary War broke out he was quick to join and became Surgeon in the Pennsylvania line. Soon after, when the medical organization of the Continental troops was revamped, he was assigned to the hospital department of the middle division of the army. That his marriage to Mary, daughter of John Mackay, of Philadelphia, had taken place at some previous date is revealed by the following letter addressed to him while in Camp by his father under date of July 31, 1776, a letter which is also of interest in disclosing the paternal pedagogue's solicitude for his surgically aspiring son:

I think you should not have carried your books to camp; you will get no money there; but may lose them.—You ought to write by every opportunity to me and to yr wife;—Cline, yr Patient is reduced by ye heat of the weather, and it is thought that he will die. Mr. Davidson says a Few drops of ye Spirits of Nitre mixd with the Tincture of Ruberb, and some other tincture, is a most sovereign remedy for the flux, that he was relieved by this when all Kuhn's other medicines could do him no Service; and ye whole or greatest part of ye virtue is in the Spirits of Nitre; every hint may be of service for I think yr business in curing this distemper, will be as great as ever it was;—”³

While he was in charge of the Continental hospital at Lititz, Pa., Dr. Alison fell victim to the prevailing epidemic and his wife joined him there to tender her devoted care. It was not unusual, in those trying times, for a soldier's family to follow him around with the various movements of the Army. The chronicles of that town record that after the removal of the army hospital to Lancaster, whither the convalescent surgeon went also, his family resided in the village of Lititz for 10 months. The author of these chronicles, a few days after the last patients had been removed, wrote that Dr. Alison, who had been in charge of the hospital located there for over ten months maintained order and discipline to the best of his ability.

³ *Penna. Mag. Hist. & Biog.* 1899, Vol. 23, p. 293.

When Dr. Alison was attacked in the epidemic of putrid fever which broke out at Lititz soon after his arrival, his associate there was also stricken, so that the village physician, Dr. Adolph Mayer, took charge until relieved by a Saxon doctor, probably Dr. Suken. At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is an autograph letter that Alison wrote to a Mr. Yates concerning an accident case and mentioning Dr. Mayer of Lititz and Dr. Suken. Dr. John Adolph Mayer (or Meyer, as he is sometimes styled), who relieved the surgeons in charge of the Continental Hospital for the first 10 days, was also a native of Saxony. He was born March 15, 1714, licensed to practice in August of 1732 and in 1742 came to Pennsylvania where he continued his profession in Bucks and Lancaster counties, to a few years prior to his death at Lititz, October 6, 1781. He was married in Philadelphia in 1745 to Justina Kraft.⁴

In a communication of Director General Dr. William Shippen, Jr., dated at West Point, December 15, 1780, the list of Dr. Alison's services during the Revolutionary War are set forth as follows:

Concord Church and Meeting House, in the vicinity of the field of Action, Brandywine,

Philadelphia, had charge and removal of wounded officers to ——— Burlington and Bristol, where he attended them 'till ordered to the ———

Ship Tavern in Chester County, to remove the wounded of General Wayne's Division Massacred at the Paoli, to the town of ———

Lancaster, at which place he remained until notified to repair to

Falkner's Swamp, to take charge of the wounded of Germantown battle, left behind on account of the violent inflammations. After three weeks he conveyed them agreeably to instructions to the town of

Reading where he dressed said men till the beginning of December.

Plumstead Meeting House in Bucks County he proceeded to immediately after and retreated with the sick of said Hospital to Lititz in Lancaster County, Agreeably to His Excellency's orders December 19, 1777, and remained there 'till the latter end of August 1778.

In September was obliged twice to attend in Philadelphia to settle Hospital Lint Accts.

⁴ Ib. 1900, Vol. 24, p. 245.

New Windsor, in the Eastern Department, he was ordered October 20, and left February 12, 1779.

At Sunbury, on the Frontier of Pennsylvania, he was ordered the beginning of May to erect Hospitals for the reception of the sick and wounded of General Sullivan's Army. The 28 of May 1780, he received instructions to repair to Headquarters—June 8 he arrived in Philadelphia.

August 25, received orders to repair to Camp and take charge of a Hospital in its vicinity.

Prior to entering the hospital service, Dr. Alison was commissioned surgeon of the 12th reg't. Penna. line.⁵

In a report found at Washington, D. C., Jordan also found Alison's name on a list of the medical officers at the Bethlehem Hospital. Here, and later at Lititz, Dr. Alison was closely associated with Dr. William Brown, of Virginia, who completed his pharmacopœia at this time—the first published in English in the United States.

After the disaster at Germantown, a part of the wounded were first treated at a place called Faulkner's Swamps, but their wounds being in bad condition, about November they were taken to Reading by Dr. Francis Alison. Here he had to attend 38 sick in the Court House Hospital, 20 in the Bunkhouse and 9 in the Potter's shop, as well as several female patients, wives of the soldiers. Some idea of the deplorable conditions with which Alison had to cope in these so-called hospitals can be gleaned from the heart-rending reports of Benjamin Rush who so actively fought for improvement in the sad plight of the sick and wounded. From Bethlehem, he wrote: "While I am writing these few lines there are several brave fellows expiring within fifty yards of me from being confined in a hospital whose air has been rendered putrid by the sick and wounded being crowded together."⁶ Not only was it difficult to obtain food and clothing, but the elementary necessities for ordinary cleanliness and hygiene were sorely lacking. Requisitions like the following give striking testimony to such wants:

⁵ Jordan, John W., "Continental Hospital Returns," *Penna. Mag. Hist. & Biog.*, 1899, Vol. 23, p. 35, and p. 210.

⁶ Goodman, Nathan G., *Benjamin Rush, Physician and Citizen*. Phila., 1934, p. 91.

F. Alison

THE GENERAL
PRACTICE OF PHYSIC;
Extracted chiefly from the
WRITINGS
OF THE
Most celebrated Practical Physicians,
AND
TRANSACTIONS of the LONDON COLLEGE,
MEDICAL ESSAYS, and MEMOIRS of the
Learned ACADEMIES in EUROPE.

To which is prefixed
An INTRODUCTION,
CONTAINING
INQUIRIES relative to the PATIENT,
Of distinguishing one DISEASE from another,
Of the PULSE,
Of the Consent of the NERVOUS PARTS,
Of OBSTRUCTIONS, &c.

Multum egerunt qui ante nos fuerunt, sed non peregerunt: Multum
adhuc restat operæ, multumque restabit, neque ulli nato post mille
sæcula præcidetur occasio aliquid adjiciendi. SENECA.

By R. BROOKES, M. D.

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V O L. I.

L O N D O N,

Printed for T. CARNAN, and F. NEWBERRY, Jun. at N^o. 65,
in St. Paul's Church-Yard.

MDCCLXXI.

Francis Alison Jun^r
Nov^r 1771

Fig. 3.

A book from the library of Francis Alison, Jr., in possession of the author.

"A few articles much wanted at the hospital" (at Lititz), "which Mr. Malsly informs me he brought from Bethlehem and left in Reading.

"6 Large Washing Tubs
2 Large Iron Pots
4 Dozen Wooden Bowls
1 Dozen Brushes (sweeping)
Chamber Pots
Combs, etc.

"We have never been supplied with these things, consequently stand in great need.

"You will please send by the same wagon, the sugar and tea you were so kind as to promise me.

Your very humble servant,

FRANCIS ALISON
Senior Surgeon

"P. S. Dr. Brown presents his compliments to you and will also thank you for some tea and sugar."⁷

Yet, when the Rush-Shippen controversy was raging so furiously in the spring of 1778, Shippen solicited statements from some of the medical officers in the hospitals, and Dr. Francis Alison, Jr., writing from Lititz on April 14, 1778, said, in brief:

"I have supplied the place of a Senior Surgeon in the middle division since August 1st and during that time I have never known sick or wounded to be served with adulterated wine; neither did they lack stores and much attention was paid to them by Dr. Shippen."⁸

Among the Alison Papers preserved in the manuscript division of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia is a group of Autograph Documents listed as the Continental Hospital Returns, 1777-1778, which constitute official reports of sick and wounded revolutionary soldiers under the care of Dr. Alison and others during this period. These returns were published in full by John W. Jordan⁹ who also wrote an extensive and lucid account of "The Military Hospitals at Bethlehem during the Revolution" culled from the diaries of the Moravian Congregations of those towns.⁹ A tablet

⁷ Gibson, James E., *Dr. Bodo Otto and the Medical Background of the American Revolution*. Springfield, Ill., 1937, p. 164.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁹ *Penna. Mag. Hist. & Biog.*, 1896, vol. 20, p. 137.

marking the site of the military hospital was erected at Bethlehem in 1897 in memory of the soldiers who died there.¹⁰

It is interesting, too, to note from these returns, that there were nearly always some female nurses at hand to assist the physicians.¹¹ At first the regulations provided one nurse to every ten sick, at one-fifteenth of a dollar per day, or two dollars per month, and a matron to superintend the nurses and bedding, etc. Nurses were required to attend the sick and obey the matron's orders.¹² These regulations pertaining to nurses were later changed and modified.

Following is a summarized list of these hospital reports: (Fig. 4).

1. Return of the Sick and Wounded in Lititz Hospital from Jan. 12 to 22nd, 1778.

A total of 173 admissions of whom 1 was discharged, 12 died, 2 deserted, while the remainder were listed as follows: 1 wounded, 89 convalescent, 4 Intermitt. (intermittent fever), 3 Lues Vener., 8 Rheumatism, 12 Pleuritis, 25 Putrid Fever (probably typhus in many cases), 11 Psora, 4 peripneum, 1 hernia.

2. List of Sick and Wounded in the Hospital at Plumstead December 10, 1777, a total of 40, of whom 2 died, 10 were discharged, 28 remained. The diseases listed were: Inflam. Fever 8, Cough 1, Peripneumon 3, Diarrhea 6, Pleuritis 7, Convalescent 6, Rheumatism 2, Putrid Fever 3, Pain in Ear 1, Venereal 1, Intermittents 1, Wounded Thumb 1.

3. Return of the Wounded Belonging to Different Regts. etc. in Lancaster 11th Oct. '77 (from General "Wain's" Division at Paoli).

4. Return of Sick 1st Regt. November 9, 1778, in the hand of and signed by Miles King, Surgeon.

5. Return of Sick, October 23, 1778, signed by Miles King.

6. Return of Sick, November 19, 1778, unsigned.

7. Another Return undated and unsigned.

¹⁰ Beck, James M., *Unveiling of a Tablet at Bethlehem, Pa.*, June 19, 1897, Pa. Soc. Sons of the Revolution, Phila., 1897, p. 107.

¹¹ Duncan, Louis C., *Medical Men of the American Revolution*. Carlisle Barracks, Penna., 1931, p. 224 et seq.

¹² Toner, Joseph M., *Medical Men of the Revolution*. Phila., 1876, p. 34, note 2.

253

8. List of Capt. Reed's Company with a list of the sick. Unsigned.

9. Roll of Sick 14th Virginia Regt. November 19, 1778.

10. Autograph Note requesting admission of two sick soldiers, November 28, 1778.

11. Return of Sick sent from Robinson's to New Windsor signed by B. William, Surgeon.

12. Return of Sick belonging to the 8th Virginia Regt. signed by Hugh Martin, S. M. (Surgeon's Mate).

13. A similar return signed by Charles Greer, S. Mate.

14. A note ordering a soldier to the Hospital.

15. Return of Sick of Delaware Regt. signed by John Platt, S. Mate, D. Regt.

16. A note admitting a soldier to New Windsor hospital addressed to Doctor Alison, Superintending the Hospitals, New Windsor, signed by John Ross, Assist. Surg.

17. List of sick men brought to New Windsor Hospital by order of Gen. Muhlenberg, November 28, 1778.

18. Return of Sick of the Second Maryland Regt. signed by Jos. McCallmont, Surg.

19. Return of Sick of the 6th Maryland Regt. signed by W. Warfield, A. S. (Assistant Surgeon).

20. Return of Sick of the 5th Maryland Regt. signed by William Kitty, Surg.

21. Return of Sick of the 7th Maryland Regt., signed by H. Sabbs, Surg'n.

22. Return of the 6th Maryland Regt. signed by W. Warfield, A. S.

23. Return of Sick of the 1st Maryland Regt. signed by the Captain for Want of Doctors.

24. An unsigned note requesting the admission of a patient.

25. Another.

26. Sixteen Weekly lists of Sick and Wounded in the General Hospital at Sunbury.

After the war was over Dr. Alison returned with his family to his estate at Chatham, in London Grove Township, Chester County, Pa., where in addition to his medical practice he became a fairly successful gentleman farmer. He had eight children, one of whom, his namesake, died at the early age of fourteen. Another son, Robert was graduated in medicine from the University of Pennsylvania in the class of 1819. When his brother, Dr. Benjamin Alison, an early American graduate in Medicine (Fig. 5), who also saw active medical service throughout the Revolution, died, he left Francis as executor in his will. At the Ridgeway Library of Philadelphia there is entombed among the manuscript collections a holograph petition of Francis Alison, Executor of Doctor Benj. Alison, Dec'd. addressed to the Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania stating that the deceased had furnished sundry supplies and medicines in Northumberland County in 1775 and petitioning payment for the same. The letter was read in the Senate January 13, 1791, and ordered to lie on the table.

Near the close of the Revolutionary War, the Legislature of Pennsylvania passed an act for procuring an estimate of the damage sustained from the British troops during the War. Dr. John Davis, of Tredyffrin, had all his medicines, (of which, from the inventory, he appears to have had quite a full supply), taken in order to replenish the army medicine chests of his Britannic Majesty. From London Grove Township Dr. Francis Alison, styling himself late Senior Surgeon, General Hospital, claimed as his share of damages £ 451-7-6, a considerable fortune, indeed, for that impoverished post war period, could it ever have been collected. (13)

Dr. Alison died on May 11, 1813. His will, posted, at the County Court House at West Chester, Pa., on April 4, 1813, gives some insight as to his situation up to the time of his decease.

"I, Francis Alison of the Township of London Grove in the County of Chester and State of Pennsylvania, Dr. of Physic and Surgery Considering the uncertainty of this transitory life do make and declare these Sureties to Contain my last will and testament, that is to say: I give and bequeath unto my beloved wife, Mary, in Liew of her Dower, all the profits of the farm on

¹³ Futhey, J. S., and Cope, Gilbert, *History of Chester County, Pa.*, Phila., 1881, p. 106.

which I now reside with all the Stock and farming Utensils now thereon during the term of her widowhood. To my son Oliver I bequeath all my books that are not professional, to my Son, Robert, I bequeath all my medical Books, Medicine and Instruments. I do hereby order and empower my Executors hereinafter named to Sell and Convey all the lands I may be possessed of at my decease on the Youngheagany River or Elsewhere Excepting my lands Situate in the township of London Grove and Londonderry, the Amounts of which Sales I do order to be Equally divided among my two Sons, Oliver and Robert, and my Daughters Rachel, Louisa and Julia—Unto my Daughter Sarah Adams the sum of One Dollar as her share of my Estate in full.”

Dated May 9, 1813 (two days before his demise).

Thus died the man. His chief claim upon our memory rests in the fact that he had served his country faithfully during the days of its birthpains. So far as I can at present ascertain, he left no written mark upon the annals of medicine. But oblivious to all the turmoil and political intrigues rife at the time in the medical department of the Continental Army, he served his fellow men faithfully and constantly and to the best of his abilities. No more can be asked of any man.

